

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Essay Contest – 2001

First Prize: Christopher F. Russell, Dimmitt Middle School, Seattle

On January 15, 1929 Michael Luther King was born. His mom, a school teacher Alberta King, and his dad a Baptist minister Michael Luther King, was his parents. After living his boyhood in the Sweet Auburn District, he graduated from Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia with a B. A. degree in 1948. Two years later he would get married to Coretta Scott in Marion, Alabama. They had four children named Yolanda Denise, Martin Luther King III, Dexter, and Bernice Albertine. In 1954 he fulfilled his childhood dreams, he preached in Montgomery, Alabama at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. While he was preaching he was still in school and in 1955 he got a Ph.D. in systematic theology. A year later the law caught up to him. King was arrested in 1956 on January 26 for driving 30 mph in a 25 mph zone and four days later his house was bombed.

A year later in January, black ministers formed what came to be known as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. King was named the first president. One month later in this non-typical year of demonstrations, King traveled a total of 780,000 miles and made 208 speeches. In 1958 his first book was published. It was called *Stride Toward Freedom*, and the book was about his recollections of the Montgomery bus boycott. In 1962 he met with President John F. Kennedy to urge support for civil rights. While in jail, Dr. King wrote "Letter from Birmingham Jail." This eloquent letter, later widely circulated, became a classic of the civil rights movement. In August 28, 1963, 250,000 civil rights supporters attended the March on Washington. At the Lincoln Memorial, Dr. King delivered the now famous and motivating "I Have A Dream" speech. In 1964, King put out a second book entitled "Why We Can't Wait." In 1959, he had traveled to India and met with the epitome of peace, Gandhi. King will forever credit Gandhi's passive techniques for his own civil-rights handbook. On December 10, 1964, he won the Nobel Peace Prize.

In the year of 1965, Martin met with President Lyndon B. Johnson on February 9 and other American leaders about voting rights for Americans of African descent. The hatred surrounding the black vote was unbelievable. I found out from my mother (who was then just a baby) that at one time we did have the right to vote. That hate mongers had taken it away. That for hundreds of years, white people worked systematically to "legally" remove any freedom that belonged to these pearls of black. As I continued to research Dr. King's history, I was saddened by the continued mistreatment of these human beings. Hatred by the dominant society was so great that on April 4, 1968, our precious leader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was savagely assassinated by James Earl Ray as he relaxed on the balcony of his hotel room. It was only years later that this country finally honored this great humanitarian with a holiday. In 1986, the first national celebration of King's birthday was held on January 20th. I understand that at that time, not all states participated, that hatred was still thriving in many states that denied the celebration.

The Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. was to gain full citizenship rights for Americans of African descent and to achieve racial equality. Yet because of the color of my skin, I

am still not treated fairly or equally. I'm only 13 years old yet even at school, teachers assume I'm worthless and not of value. I see black girls beating up on each other at least once a week. What's up with that? The school system doesn't like us there. I know this because I can hear the teachers saying bad things about us, and leave after putting in only one year at the school. Leaving nothing good behind. Not caring to make an impact on any one of us. I sometimes long for the old days when my mom speaks of teachers who mentored and ushered her into a successful academic experience. I know it is early year but not one teacher my eight years in the schools has attempted to become my friend or shown any interest in my future. I'm a boy who wants to become a man. My mother says to stay away from the police and I just might make it. I want and am trying to reach for the mountaintop but realized that this place is not the same for everyone. Every person should have his or her own definition of what the mountaintop is. If a poor person is struggling just to eat and finally gets food, for them, they have reached the mountaintop. My mountaintop changes each year. Every year I strive to get good grades, get better skills in basketball and try to fit in. But I'm met every year with new foes, negative attitudes and mistreatment. I am an American. Please just let me be an American. Today, it's tough being a nice person. My friends want me to be a leader but I'm not allowed to fight so they "play" me. I have love for people but it isn't "cool" to show it. Where are my role models and mentors? Why won't they hire black teachers?

Help me, Dr. King. Everything costs so much today. The bottom line is money and I don't have any. My family can love me but no one can stop people from not liking me because of the color of my skin. I'm worthwhile, love to laugh and like to have fun but the dominant society doesn't take this kind of behavior seriously. So at school the black kids are watched, even followed around. Dr. King did all he could and I thank him. But I don't think he factored in the self-hatred of blacks about blacks as a means of keeping me down. Those who marched alongside Dr. King do not want to "share" with the younger ones coming along. They hang on to their "going to jail" and yet will not embrace the young people. My mother once asked a black, female politician if she would help teach her the ways and bring her along so that other good, competent, caring women would be ready for her to pass the baton on to. Instead, this person cursed my mom out and told her that if she ever ran for office, she'd block her out in any way that she could even if it meant telling lies. This hurt my mom terribly because she has been a public servant all her life. Never taking credit where she should have. Always working hard behind the scene. This politician's hatred could not have been what Dr. King was asking for in his speeches. I'm being raised in what society calls middle class but some of the boys I play ball with in the inner city call me names. Don't they know we live week to week just like everyone else.

I have a right to like nice things. I have a right to speak well. I have the right to wear what I want to wear. This is what King gave his life for, isn't it? All I can do is hang on and envision what my mountaintop will look like.

My mountaintop will have people on it that smile at me, hug me and want to help me to do what ever I choose to do. My mama's macaroni and cheese will be there and so will my NBA contract and if I'm lucky, maybe even my degree.

